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SUBJECT: FOOD DISTRIBUTION TENSE IN SOUTHERN TAJIKISTAN

¶1. Summary: USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) provided Tajikistan with \$3.35 million for emergency winter food distribution for the most vulnerable in Tajikistan. On February 26, visiting Assistance Coordinator Dan Rosenblum visited Hiloli village in a Khatlon province in Southern Tajikistan to see food being distributed by implementer Save the Children. While rural areas are usually nearly empty of men, many migrant workers were back from Russia and there was large crowd of men at the distribution site. With sixty percent of households receiving food, a scuffle broke out when some men started demanding of local officials that the food be distributed to all. End Summary.

¶2. With over three million dollars of funding from USAID's OFDA, the USG, through implementers Mercy Corps and Save the Children, is distributing food to vulnerable families in some of the most food insecure rural areas of Tajikistan. Flour, cooking oil and lentils were procured in the region, and originally were to be distributed in two tranches in December and February. Because of transshipment delays in Uzbekistan, all the food was distributed in February. Implementers worked with local governments to identify the most vulnerable areas and the most vulnerable households in those areas. Criteria for households included those headed by women, headed by pensioners, with children under two, the homeless, and the disabled without a source of regular income or major assets.

¶3. On February 26, Dan Rosenblum, Assistance Coordinator for Europe attended a food distribution in Hiloli village in the Khurosan district of Khatlon province in southern Tajikistan. Hiloli village is an area without irrigation that depends on rain for agricultural production and drinking water. Because of limited water supplies the villagers mainly make their living from raising livestock and gathering firewood. Due to the severity of last winter, when most livestock were either sold for money for food or perished in the cold, and with wood stocks similarly depleted, food and income was sharply curtailed in the village. Of 198 households, 60% qualified as vulnerable and eligible for food aid.

¶4. As with most rural areas nearly every family has had one or members migrate to Russia for work and to send back money. Usually when visiting such villages we see lots of women and children and few older men. This time, however we arrived at the site to find a large crowd of probably 200 men milling around. As the few women present lined up to present their identification for the food distribution, a scuffle broke out as some men approached the local government officials present and demanded that the available food be distributed equally among all households, rather than food going only to those that met

the criteria. After several minutes of shouting, degenerating into pushing and shoving, cooler heads prevailed and things settled back down.

¶5. Although many migrant workers return during December-January when construction in Russia slows, the villagers reported that men had come back as early as September this year as they lost their jobs. Most of the men who had returned did not have jobs to go back to in Russia come spring. When asked about their plans most said they would look around at home for something to do, and if nothing turned up would go back to Russia to try to find work.

¶6. Comment: The food security issues in Hiloli village demonstrate the continued negative impact from last year's harsh winter. The large crowd of men bore out reports that number of migrants who returned this winter was higher than in previous years and their early return almost certainly means the village has gotten less remittance income in recent months. How many stay and many return to Russia this spring will be a key test. The confrontation for local officials is relatively unusual, but shows the potential for increased tension as large numbers of unemployed men find themselves at loose ends.

JACOBSON